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Frank Umbach

Following Pakistan's recent revelations about trading nuclear for missile technology with North Korea, the crisis on the Korean peninsula has intensified. As six-way talks were scheduled to resume in late February, the World Food Program—which has long been feeding six million North Koreans to stave off starvation—appealed for more aid, as international donors began to balk at pouring humanitarian money into a country that spends its own money on weapons.

The current crisis began building in October 2002, when North Korean negotiators admitted to American counterparts that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had a secret nuclear-weapons program based on highly-enriched uranium (HEU). The last previous crisis had blown up in the mid-1990s amid signs that a known North Korean plutonium program was being used to develop nuclear weapons. At that point international monitoring was set up, with permanent cameras at the country's nuclear plants.

In January 2003, following its admission that it had an HEU program, North Korea became the only state ever to leave the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. It expelled the inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and had all electronic and other monitoring devices removed from its known nuclear installations. In July and October of 2003 Pyongyang declared that it had long since succeeded in reprocessing its 8,000 nuclear fuel rods, an operation that would have yielded enough plutonium to produce several warheads. Indeed, the United States, China, Japan, and the IAEA estimate that Pyongyang already has between two and six nuclear warheads.

North Korea's strategy of nuclear extortion is by no means new; for more than ten years Pyongyang has practiced nuclear blackmail.

In exchange for giving up its nuclear ambitions, North Korea's leadership demands the establishment of diplomatic relations and a bilateral non-aggression treaty with Washington, along with payment to it of substantial economic subsidies.

Once before, in the 1990s' confrontation, the United States and the international community in effect rewarded Pyongyang's strategy of nuclear extortion economically and, indirectly, also politically. This, however, weakened global arms-control efforts by applying a double standard. In theory, the United States and the international community are now, once

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again, left with options of targeted military strikes, economic sanctions, or negotiations.

Many observers prematurely expected the United States to carry out military actions against North Korea like those in Iraq. But this is unlikely; the military risk is too high, and Washington needs the support of its allies and other countries in the region, especially China. Moreover, the 12 million residents of South Korea's capital, Seoul, are located only forty kilometers from the border; they would run the risk of being obliterated within a few hours or days by a counterblow from North Korea's conventional forces or by its chemical or potentially even biological weapons.

Besides, the secret services of several nations no longer exclude the possibility that North Korea has a second nuclear reprocessing plant tucked away somewhere in a subterranean bunker that is neither known to the United States nor detectable by spy satellites. This could even pose the risk of a North Korean nuclear response.

Nor is a renewal of economic sanctions any more promising. Given the harsh living conditions in the Democratic People's Republic, sanctions could easily lead to a rapid collapse of the regime and loose uncontrolled streams of refugees and other chaos.

The only remaining option is the path of negotiations. The United States still insists on multilateral talks, while North Korea until recently insisted on exclusively bilateral talks with the US. At the six-way negotiations that finally began among the two Koreas, the United States, Japan, Russia, and China, Washington is demanding a "complete, verifiable, and irreversible" halt of all North Korean activities aimed at producing nuclear weapons before the United States will be willing to discuss any economic or other assistance to North Korea.

While the United States State Department has softened its position somewhat and adopted a more flexible quid-pro-quo approach (as in the ten-point plan of Republican Congressman Curt Weldon), Pentagon hardliners who believe in forcing regime change still seem to oppose it. However, the US is now willing to begin negotiations and set the inspection question to one side for the time being.

Pyongyang's Violations

That said, it is not primarily Washington, but Pyongyang, that is to blame for the new crisis. The country has violated several international agreements with its secret nuclear-weapons program: the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework, the 1992 North-South Declaration of the two Korean States on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and the 1992 IAEA Safeguard Agreement. No other country has so often and so provocatively violated international arms-control agreements, even to the point of threatening nuclear war.

Given this history, it is doubtful whether a bilateral non-aggression treaty with the US could really provide the North Korean leadership with an effective security guarantee

against preventive military strikes by the United States. Such a treaty would contradict Pyongyang's traditional security perception and founding father Kim Il Sung's propaganda-laden juche (self-sufficiency) ideology. Pyongyang also seems to perceive the US intervention in Iraq as a potential model for American action against North Korea, with enforced disarmament as a prelude to enforced regime change. This makes the odds for successful negotiations very low. Indeed, President Kim Jong Il was quoted in June 2001 as having told his military that such agreements and treaties cannot really prevent war and secure peace.

Moreover, even if the United States were extremely flexible—and even given the greatest optimism for the six-way talks—it is hardly realistic to expect an effective agreement on verification. The reason is not so much that North Korea might not be willing to renounce nuclear weapons; Pyongyang would still retain effective weapons (especially chemical weapons) for a retaliatory strike against Seoul. Much more important is the issue of verification; for such an agreement to work, the same IAEA conditions (which Pyongyang already rejected in the past) would have to apply to North Korea as to Iran and other nuclear threshold states. In contrast to the last deal in the 1990s, North Korea would be required not only to open up self-designated installations for IAEA inspections, but would also have to agree to an additional protocol that would give the IAEA access to any suspicious installations for verification without prior notice. This concession would be necessary not only because North Korea has little credibility, but also because these verification regulations are an integral component of the IAEA's global verification regime and because reduced inspections would set a double standard that would undermine global arms-control efforts.

In this sense what is at stake in the negotiations with Pyongyang (as in those with Tehran) is no less than the future of global arms-control regimes. Yet even the most starry-eyed optimists cannot at present imagine that Pyongyang would agree to such an inspection regime, since it would entail monitoring North Korea's more than 10,000 subterranean bunkers. Almost from one day to the next, North Korea would have to transform itself from one of the most closed political systems to an almost entirely transparent country.

Dangers of Resignation

Must the international community then resign itself to coexistence with a North Korea equipped with nuclear weapons, just as it did with Pakistan and India? Such an outcome would have grave consequences for regional stability and security in Northeast Asia. It could lead to an accelerated regional arms race and perceptions of mutual threat, making crisis management on the Korean peninsula even more unpredictable. What is more, the first priority of the six-way talks would have to be the cessation of

all exports of technologies that might be used to produce nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles and only secondarily the issue of Pyongyang's nuclear-weapons option.

By far the greatest damage from the failure of these negations would be sustained by global arms-control regimes and multilateral disarmament efforts. They would, in effect, find complete defeat staring them in the face. Global security policy would need to define either entirely new instruments or would again have to retreat to the old categories of nuclear strategic deterrence; yet the old theory of rational-actor deterrence would not necessarily prove effective in the case of North Korea.

Only the United States and China might have the influence to change North Korea's policies—and it is not clear that even they do. US policies have been largely based on the belief that time is on the side of Washington and it can simply wait for North Korea to collapse. Until recently, on the basis of its intelligence information, the Bush administration has tended to dismiss North Korean claims that it has restarted its nuclear-weapons program at Yongbyon by reprocessing previously sealed and monitored spent fuel to extract plutonium for a nuclear-weapons option. It cannot verify whether North Korea has done so somewhere else, however. If it has, this might prove to have been another intelligence failure like that with the Taepodong missile launch; in that case US intelligence dismissed information that North Korea was able to launch a three-stage ballistic missile shortly before Pyongyang actually did so in August 1998.

For China, the present crisis on the Korean peninsula can be seen as the most important litmus test for Beijing's evolving foreign and security policies and the measure of whether and how far China is willing to take over regional and global responsibility for international crisis management. While China has recently become more active in Korean policy as it has come to perceive Pyongyang as a potential security liability—as shown by the severely strained bilateral relationship with North Korea in the past few years—a divided Korea still seems to have advantages for China. Beijing therefore currently prefers the unstable status quo to any regime change.

Nonetheless, whatever the outcome of the recent crisis on the Korean peninsula, it will necessarily lead to long-term changes in Beijing's policies toward the Korean peninsula, China's overall foreign and security policies, and the future of multilateralism in Northeast Asia.

The Libyan Surprise

So far Col. Muhammar Qaddafi's surprising shift in forfeiting Libya's nuclear-weapons program and inviting UN inspectors into Libya to verify cessation of activities—thus revealing thriving Pakistani exports of nuclear-weapons materials and know-how to countries like North Korea—has had no immediate impact on Pyongyang. The six-party ne-

gotiations demonstrate once more, however, that on the densely-populated Korean peninsula there is no alternative to jaw-jaw. The only hope seems to rest on a quid-pro-quo strategy for lengthy negotiations that might ultimately lead either to a radical change of views and policies on the North Korean side or else to the kind of regime change from within that the Bush administration would like to see.

Close cooperation among Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo is thus the crucial prerequisite for any future negotiations with North Korea. Pyongyang apparently sees its 2003 policies of nuclear crisis as having failed to achieve anything beyond ensuring the regime's survival. For the future that might not be enough—for Pyongyang, Beijing, or anyone else in the six-party talks or in the wider region. Most recently, Pyongyang is even disputing that it ever admitted having an enriched uranium program.

This backtracking has strengthened doubts in South Korea and Beijing about whether North Korea really does have a covert program to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. A recent private US delegation in North Korea could confirm only that the spent fuel facility was empty and that the 8,000 spent fuel rods had indeed been removed to a new and unknown place. One member of this group, Siegfried Hecker, a former director of the US nuclear research center in Los Alamos, is convinced that the North Koreans have the equipment and the expertise for reprocessing as well as enriching uranium in order to produce plutonium—though he is not yet convinced that they also have the expertise to build nuclear warheads for missiles. Yet America's intelligence credibility is also increasingly being called into question in the case of North Korea's nuclear ambitions and capabilities, given the intelligence debacle in the apparently overblown estimates of Baghdad's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction.

Under these extremely difficult circumstances the best case hope is that the next six-party-talks might at least lead to a more regular and institutionalized process that could drag on indefinitely.

Given North Korea's domestic policies and the likely ramifications of the nuclear crisis on Sino-Japanese and other relations beyond the Korean peninsula, it is not clear whether China and the rest of the world will have the patience just to wait and pursue inconclusive negotiations until such time as North Korea might follow the lead of Libya and Iran and fundamentally changes its thinking and policies. Yet at the end of the day the rest of the world has little choice. Trying to force regime change from outside would seem doomed to increase regional instability and trigger unintended and unwanted consequences.